Social class, place and urban young people’s aspirations for work in the knowledge economy: ‘Sticky subjects’ or ‘cosmopolitan creatives’?

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You have to open their minds that they can go to the city, they can go abroad. You can’t turn around a school without turning around a community. (England Schools Commissioner, Liz Sidwell, September 2011)

Aspirations have been a key target of UK education policy, situated as critical to raising attainment, increasing employability and enhancing social mobility (see Spohrer, 2011). Within these debates, young people from ‘disadvantaged’ areas have been singled out as ‘suffering’ from ‘low’ aspirations, and as the quote above indicates, an attachment to place which hinders their success in education and rapidly changing labour market. Attempts to raise aspirations have formed a central driver of the government’s agenda to meet the needs of the ‘knowledge economy’ (Warrington, 2008), with education playing a crucial role in producing young people who are fit for ‘an economy driven by the creation and exploitation of knowledge’ (DCSF, 2009).

The creative industries – including sectors ranging from design through to television (DCMS, 2008) – have featured centrally within this agenda, identified as emblematic of wider economic

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transformations where jobs for life have been replaced by ‘jobs for the life of the project’ (Leadbeater, 1998). Characterized by freelanced, networked and project-based employment, the creative industries demand ‘knowledge workers’ who are flexible, entrepreneurial and mobile. Within UK government policy there have been calls to raise aspirations for careers in the creative sector among young people from all backgrounds (DCMS, 2008). Yet, counter to celebratory accounts which depict this sector as ‘cool, creative and egalitarian’ (Gill, 2002), it is socially and spatially restrictive. Unclear entry routes and exclusionary working practices have contributed to a lack of social diversity in the creative workforce and the sector is unevenly concentrated, with London and the South East home to almost half the workforce (Anon, forthcoming; Oakley, 2006; Skillset, 2006).

Drawing on a small-scale exploratory qualitative study, we contribute to a growing body of work which critiques neoliberal policy discourses concerned with raising aspiration as both asocial and aspatial (Archer, 2010; Holloway et al, 2011; St Clair & Benjamin, 2010; Warrington, 2008). Examining the geographies of young people’s aspirations for careers in the creative economy, across three urban areas of deindustrialisation in England, we show how social class and place interrelate to shape young people’s horizons for spatial and social mobility through and for work in the knowledge economy.

Questions of mobility are central to these discussions: mobility and mobile subjects are evoked both within descriptions of work in the knowledge and creative economy and government policy discourse in which attachment to place is seen to hinder the ‘successful’ realisation of aspiration. This paper deploys a conceptualisation of ‘mobility’ as not simply about the physical act of moving between places, but linked to contemporary economies of selfhood and relations of power (Cresswell,
Specifically, mobility has come to be associated with a bourgeois ‘cosmopolitan’ subjectivity – highly individualized, flexible and able to move seamlessly through various spaces – while the immobility and attachment to place of the working class has acquired connotations of defeat, fixity and failure (Skeggs, 2004).

**Class, place, habitus and aspiration: theoretical framework**

In order to move away from a deficit construction of aspiration which holds young people responsible for their own (lack of) ambition and (im)mobility in education and work, we draw on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) to understand aspirations as not simply ‘in the head’ (Archer, 2010), but structured by objective conditions, so that some courses of action are excluded from young people’s ‘plausibility structures’ (Skeggs, 2004) as ‘unthinkable’ and undesirable. Many within the sociology of education have examined how parents and family provide a ‘general framework’ for young people’s aspirations (Archer et al., 2010; Reay et al, 2005; Ball et al., 2000), and also how habitus may be transformed through other social experiences such as schooling (Dumais, 2002; Horvat & Davis, 2010). Indeed, predisposing rather than predetermining individuals towards certain ways of behaving, habitus has been understood to be a ‘generative structure’ (McNay, 1999: 100), permeable and responsive, at least to some extent, to other social experiences.

In geography, habitus has been used variously to examine ‘the interpenetration of locality and identity’ (Ingram, 2009: 422; and see Bridge 2006). Sandercook writes:

> Habitus is a field of social relations structurally, but that field also has a spatial component, the spaces of city, as well as social
spaces in which one feels ‘at home’, where we experience both a positive sense of belonging, as well as knowing where we belong, in the social order. (2005: 222)

Thus habitus can be understood to relate not simply to class-based dispositional understandings of what is thinkable for ‘people like me’ but also for ‘people from round here’. We see young people’s aspirations - their sense of where they belong – as being deeply entangled with their social and spatial location.

Notions of a metropolitan (Butler, 2002; Butler and Robson, 2003; Webber, 2007) or cosmopolitan habitus (Nava, 2007; Allen, 2005) are particularly useful when examining the interconnections between class, place and aspirations for careers in creative sector among urban youth. These concepts are useful for attending to the ways in which patterns of cultural consumption and global flows of people concentrate within particular urban locales, and how these produce constructions of people and place. The metropolitan habitus has been associated with the movement of a new middle class, including creative sector workers, to particular cities both for employment and to access particular lifestyles (Van Eijk, 2010). Indeed, creative economy ‘guru’ Richard Florida, cites cities as ‘cauldrons of creativity’ as ‘certain places [which] secure a greater quantity and quality of flows of creative talent... [are] open, cool, ethnically diverse, tolerant talent harnessing places’ (2005: 7). While, according to the UK’s ‘Creativity Index’ (Demos, 2003), the top 10 creative cities are London, Manchester, Leicester Nottingham, Bristol, Brighton, Birmingham, Coventry, Cardiff and Edinburgh, many other areas (including previously industrialized localities) have attempted to develop their own creative sectors. Indeed, Oakley (2006) reveals how the creative industries - and ‘creative
people’ - have been evoked in national and local and regional policy as vehicles for driving economic productivity and reducing social problems, ‘transforming’ rundown urban areas through attracting creative people. Descriptions of what the creative economy and creative workers do to places and the people within them is highly evocative of Nava's (2007) cosmopolitan sensibilities: outward looking, associated with modernity, engagement with difference, and a revolt against the ‘traditional’. They are also underlined by an idealization of mobility. Indeed, mobility is central to the creation of the metropolitan habitus and to the production of creative worker subjectivities –oriented around flexibility, enterprise, and willingness to move for work. Rootedness to place is thus antithetical to the kinds of subjects demanded by the creative economy and associated with, or productive of, creative places.

While the metropolitan or cosmopolitan habitus have often been constructed as a middle class habitus, associated with resource rich, urban-seeking professionals (Bulter & Robson, 2003), the conditions these place-specific habitus produce have implications for all residents in those places. As Bourdieu et al. state ‘...the fashionable neighbourhood symbolically consecrates its inhabitants by allowing each one to partake of the capital accumulated by the inhabitants as a whole. Likewise, the stigmatized area symbolically degrades its inhabitants...’ (1999: 129). Indeed, not all places are constituted as cosmopolitan, creative cities: despite numerous areas producing local economic policy which states the importance of nurturing local creative industries, this is often an aspiration rather than reality, with clear geographic disparities across the UK (Oakley, 2006). Furthermore, not all subjects can ‘lay claim’ to places or ‘inhabit the discursive
positioning’ of the cosmopolitan subject (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004: 7). Rather, appropriation of place and of cosmopolitan sensibilities depends on the social, economic and cultural capital subjects can deploy: ‘There are cosmopolitan winners and cosmopolitan losers…. [some people] travel through the spaces with sub-cultural value, accumulating knowledge and enhancing their own reservoir of cultural capital, yet others cannot do the same’ (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004: 57). Thus, while place is important to shaping habitus, social class can produce a stickiness which mediates how subjects inhabit place.

In this paper we are interested in how urban locales generate (and are generative of) a place-specific habitus which shape how careers in the creative sector come to feature within young people’s imagined horizons. We explore how places come to be constructed in particular ways - as dynamic and fluid or as sticky or dead-ends – and how these shape the aspirations of local young people. We attend to how people’s spatial and social location, enables them (or not) access (at least in part) to social and cultural capital circulating in these areas and to appropriate discourses of cosmopolitanism. Understanding mobility as a social resource that is unequally distributed, we show how some subjects, through their spatial and social location, can embody mobility and weightlessness while others remain ‘sticky’.

The study
Conducted in 2008-2009, funded by Becta, the then UK government’s agency for technology in schools, this study was concerned with examining how accessible young people living in working class locales perceived work within the creative industries. The research sampled students from three non-selective, co-educational comprehensive secondary schools located in: an Eastern borough of Greater London; an
area of inner city Nottingham; and a northern district of Stoke on Trent. All locales were described as 'socially and economically deprived' areas and had undergone processes of deindustrialisation throughout the latter part of the 20th century. The London locality was the home of a large car manufacturing industry; Nottingham has a history of industrial employment, most notably the textile industry; and Stoke on Trent was home to pottery, mining and steel industries. All areas had, to varying degrees, been subject to targeted regeneration agendas, and the creative sector featured heavily within regional economic documents of all three locales at the time of the research.

A total of 28 young people (aged 14-16 years), studying media courses participated in individual and group interviews. Despite attending schools in areas of ‘deprivation,’ participants were from a range of social class backgrounds, according to parental occupations. The Nottingham and London sample were from a range of ethnicities while the Stoke on Trent sample was mainly white. Young people were asked about the local area, experiences of the school, informal learning, and local education and employment opportunities. They were given photographs of creative industry occupations and ‘scenes’ (e.g. camera operators, games designers, radio studio, film set) and were asked to describe the kinds of people they thought worked in these occupations. Individual interviews explored in greater depth participants’ biographies including parental occupation and family history; experiences of schooling; and future aspirations. Interviews were conducted with two to three members of staff per school and representatives from local youth organizations. To contextualize and ground the primary data collection, substantial desk research was undertaken including the collection and analysis of secondary source materials for the three areas, including: school information; local
demographic data; regeneration and creative industry strategy documents and promotional material.

Data were analyzed thematically and discursively. Young people's aspirations were analyzed against information on social class (including familial occupations, family history of higher education); ethnicity; gender; and location. Analysis of interview data and document sources paid specific attention to narrative, particularly how places – and people within these - were narrated. Taking place-bounded dimensions of identity as an important source of meaning for people to draw upon to tell stories and thereby come to understand themselves and their positioning within the wider society (Kirk, 2007), we were concerned with how places come to be represented and how this informed perceived possibilities for those in our sample.

Our presentation of the data begins with a summary of the participants' career aspirations. In the rest of the paper we trace three quite different narratives of place in the three locales and outline how these produced a place-specific habitus which shaped young people's aspirations for careers in the creative sector. Within this we show that both the reproduction of habitus and possibilities for transformation (and hence shifts in aspirations) is closely tied to both local material relations and forms of representation. In the first substantive section we explore the stickiness of people and place within the Stoke on Trent locale; in the second section, working with the concept of the ‘cosmopolitan habitus’ we explore how the Nottingham and Greater London locales were narrated as areas of opportunity and possibility, characterised by flows of movement, and a proximity to other places and spaces of ‘difference’. We show how this informed how the young people conceived of creative careers as a possible or desirable destination. In the final section we attempt to complicate this
theorisation by exploring the endurance of a classed habitus despite attempts of cosmopolitan transformation.

**Place-specific habitus and geographies of possibility for careers in the creative sector**

Students’ career aspirations, across the study, were varied including: accountant, fire fighter, nursery nurse, mechanic, midwife, and criminologist. These tended to fall along gendered and classed lines, particularly in Stoke on Trent, where there was an evident preference for manual trades among young men and childcare among the female participants. Most of the young people want to go on to college and a smaller number discussed university. While some students’ aspirations were much more concrete, others (particularly the students from more working class backgrounds) had more vague notions of their future transitions, taking up a ‘wait and see’ approach. It was also common for the young people to have more than one career aspiration, or a ‘back-up’, as found in previous studies (Archer et al., 2010).

A number of students – across gender, social class and ethnic background – aspired for creative sector careers including journalism, animation, games design, photography and film-making. While these featured across all three schools, these aspirations were more common and more concrete among students in Nottingham and London. In Stoke on Trent, there was much greater ambivalence about these careers, and the majority rejected them as undesirable and ‘not for me’. While working class participants in these locales were somewhat more hesitant in how realizable these careers were, broadly the young people in Nottingham and London were more positive about these careers.

Another important finding was that most working class participants, regardless of locale, were more likely to express a desire
to stay local when discussing their imagined futures. This desire to stay local inevitably impacted on their orientation towards careers in the creative sector, but with quite different consequences depending on where they lived.

**Sticky subjects and narratives of loss**

Research on post-industrial areas (Bennett, 2009; Bright, 2011; Quinn, 2004; Jimenez and Walkerdine, 2011) reveal how narratives of loss and failure (of denuded landscapes, broken communities and fractured social relations) have come to characterise these places (Kirk, 2007). Our research found similar narratives within Stoke on Trent, where staff described how ‘virtually every industry has gone’, and drew on a shared repertoire of pejorative terms when describing the area as ‘insular’, ‘deprived’ and ‘lacking opportunities’. A representative from a local youth organisation emotively described Stoke on Trent as ‘a town on its knees’ since its industrial decline. This image powerfully evokes a sense of immobility in Stoke on Trent, constructing the area as broken and disabled, physically unable to recover from the past and ‘move on’.

The young people we interviewed drew upon a similarly bleak repertoire describing their locale as ‘miserable’, ‘rubbish’, ‘boring’, a place where there was ‘not much to do’ except ‘stealing’. It was a place that was not worth visiting: ‘never come here’. Crime, unemployment and a lack of social activities and spaces for young people were emphasized.

These narratives of Stoke on Trent as a ‘failing area’ were all-pervasive, internalized within its regeneration documents. Having employed consultants to develop a creative industry strategy (Burns Collett, 2008: 8) as part of Stoke on Trent’s regeneration agenda, the
North Staffordshire Regeneration Partnership, saw the solution of problems of ‘worklessness’ in the creation of a more knowledge-intensive economy and development of ‘creative’ and ‘cultural media’ skills. This document (Burns Collett, 2008), claimed that ‘new narratives for the region’ were needed (2008: 3). Understanding regeneration as a process designed to transform both the material and cultural landscape (Kirk, 2007), remarkable parallels can be drawn with Bennett’s (2009) critical analysis of regeneration literature in the former coalfields of East Durham. She describes ‘attempt to transform negative images of a redundant place polluted by its industrial past’ where the ‘yesterdays’ of coal, make way for a present of ‘computer chips and micro technology’ (2009). Similarly the North Staffordshire strategy document claims: ‘North Staffs [sic] can learn from other regions and be smarter about its investment decisions. It should not indulge in tired solutions for yesterday’s challenges’. (Burns Collett, 2008: 3 emphasis added). Collapsing people with place, this statement constructs the people of ‘North Staffs’ as immobile, lagging behind, resistant to change, wallowing in nostalgia, and furthermore, the creative economy as the central driver of change, mobility and modernity. Through this narrative, Stoke on Trent is constructed as a place that is stuck, and consequently, produces its inhabitants as problematically immobile and in need of transformation.

However, the material conditions were somewhat removed from this narrative of transformation. Economic disparities across the UK’s creative economy are vast (Oakley, 2006), and Stoke on Trent can be viewed as one of the knowledge economy ‘losers’. The creative industries workforce in the West Midlands makes up just four per cent of the national creative industries workforce. Furthermore, it is Birmingham which dominates (Skillset, 2006). In Stoke on Trent
creative sector employment constitutes just 1.3% of the local workforce (Burns Collett, 2008: 43). In this sense the regeneration of a ‘Creative’ Stoke is something of a mirage, and this discrepancy was not lost on the young people in our study. Despite the region’s attempts to rebrand the city as creative, dis-identification and exclusion were central motifs in the young people’s accounts. They saw few, if any, opportunities for a career in the creative sector within their local area (‘There's no jobs like that around here’) and described local creative sector employers – such as local radio stations – as ‘naff’ and ‘terrible’ rather than as credible employment opportunities. Staff reinforced this, suggesting that the local creative sector remained ‘small scale’, and these careers were ‘intangible’ and ‘floating in the air.’

This lack of a visible creative sector was accompanied by parental resistance towards such careers. In their research in the South Wales valleys, Jiminez and Walkerdine (2011) describe the lived effects of the closure of a town's central employer (the steel works) as a form of ‘social trauma’ transmitted between generations. Similar generational transmission of loss played out in our research as local parents’ first-hand experiences of unemployment, following the decline of the local pottery and coal industries, appeared to intensify anxieties about their children’s future. The media teacher explained parental discouragement of creative industries careers (as ‘too risky’) as ‘a local thing’:

They’ve seen industry stripped away [...] they’re worried if they invest in something that’s suddenly is no longer there they've wasted their time [so] I can understand why [boys] would want to be a fireman and girls work in childcare, because that's a tangible thing. [Their] parents and grandparents worked in
factories and potteries and so if they see something weird like Media they tend to discourage them.

Jodie's narrative is a case in point here. Jodie's mum was a child minder and her father a builder, and her siblings worked locally in retail and manual trades. Typical of the sample, Jodie's parents and grandparents were previously employed by the local potteries and manufacturing firms. Interested in working in fashion, Jodie undertook work experience at a wedding dress shop. Speaking to the invisibility of a local creative sector, she explained, 'I went there 'cos there wasn't really anything fashion based here...I don't know anyone working in that kind of job around here'. Jodie described her father's concerns about her career interest:

I told him I wanted to do something with art. He says 'where do you think it will get you? Do you think you'll be able to get a job and do something like that?' When I say about being a paediatrician he encourages that more.

Rebuffing policy assumptions about deflated aspirations within working class families, Jodie's story also shows how careers in the creative sector can come to be positioned as (im)plausible and (un)desirable through a multitude of intersecting factors including local family histories of work, perceptions of local opportunities and a dearth of cultural capital pertaining to creative careers. In other words, what we are talking about here are place-specific habitus that shape the aspirations of young people and their parents.

The invisibility of a local creative sector meant that young people felt any attempts to get involved with it requiring moving away:
'You have to move away for a job like that' they told us. This sentiment was reinforced by staff ('these jobs are centred around big cities and you actually have to *be there*'). However, while many discussed dreams of escaping Stoke on Trent (for example to travel to America or to live by the sea), these were tempered by a reluctance to moving away, rooted in a sense of belonging and loyalty to family (MacDonald et al., 2005; Reay & Lucey, 2000). For these young people attachment to place contributed to the exclusion of careers in the creative industries – constructed as 'in another place' – from their plausibility structure. This was reinforced by students’ encounters with people who worked in the sector: one member of staff had left to pursue a career in film-making, and another teacher had 'given up' a career in radio to return 'home' to Stoke to teach. Loyalty to the area meant pursuing a creative career was thus imbued with compromise. TJ, a working class boy whose parents ran a fish and chip shop before ‘they went broke’, enjoyed breakdancing and he competed nationally. Yet despite his talent in this area, he could not easily connect this to a tangible future career. In his interview TJ oscillated between his ‘dream’ of running a nightclub ‘somewhere else’ and following a locally familiar path of learning a manual trade. TJ told us, ‘I would like to go somewhere else...for the experience, but here feels like home...I'd always come back’. Among the young people in this locale, creative careers were not just unattainable but undesirable:  

Interviewer: What kind of people would you think do these kind of jobs?  

Laura: They look like... (laughs).... computer geeks
Mark: Like the 40 year old virgin! (All laugh)....Sad.....Annoying people

Maxine: Someone who likes the sound of their own voice....

Laura: Ambitious ...Someone who wants to get somewhere

There are a number of ways to interpret these responses. The young people hinted that such career aspirations were effectively delegitimized by career professionals: career fairs were described as catering for only ‘traditional’ aspirations such as the armed forces or retail, and the young people suggested that if they expressed an aspiration for careers in the creative sector they would be mocked or, at best, dismissed. Mark told us, ‘they would just laugh at you’. Thus the young people’s construction of these careers must be read in the context of school practices which provide a framework for what was ‘thinkable’ for young people like them. Positioning creative careers as undesirable can be seen to represent a self-protective strategy, a defense from being positioned as ‘aiming too high’ or ‘getting above yourself’ (Thomson et al., 2007; Archer & Yamashita, 2003). However we also want to locate these responses as reflecting a negotiation, or perhaps refusal, of both the aspirational project of ‘resourcing the middle class self’ (Skeggs, 2004) and local regeneration agendas which demand the (self-)transformation of place and people. The adjectives deployed to describe those who work in the sector – ‘geeky’, ‘ambitious’ even arrogant – signify a bourgeois subjectivity: cleverness, self-confidence, determination and a sense of entitlement (Reay, 2005). Class is not named explicitly but is central to these young people’s perceptions of creative careers and thus the possibilities of them
featuring in their plausibility structures. Specifically, ‘making it’ as a creative (and cosmopolitan) worker means fashioning oneself into a sophisticated, worldly, mobile and individualized worker who is willing to do anything to ‘get somewhere’. Research on former industrialized communities (Bright, 2011; Jiminez & Walkerdine, 2011) shows how values embedded in, and essential to, industrial forms of employment, namely collectivity rather than individualism or self-betterment, continue to anchor local communities even after these forms of employment have gone. Thus, raising young people’s aspirations for careers in the creative sector presents an inculcation to become a particular type of person which conflicts with the ways of being that are valued in their community. Mark’s evocation of the film ‘The 40-year old Virgin’ (2005, dir. Apatow) - and the perceived ‘crisis in masculinity’ it represents - also speaks nicely to how classed and locally embedded forms of masculinity within former industrialised landscapes shape orientation to careers in the knowledge economy. In Jiminez and Walkerdine’s study (2011) they identify resistance among men in former coal-mining communities to ‘embarrassing’ and ‘feminine’ service sector jobs. It could be equally argued that in Stoke, which shares similar transformations in local employment, ‘traditional working class masculinity’ has to be performed in other ways which contribute to the exclusion of careers in the creative sector – associated with brains and not brawn (Blair, 1999: 3), intellect not physical capability - within local young men’s plausibility structure. Mark whose parents worked in distribution, explained how he was encouraged by his father to apply to the Fire Service as an alternative to ‘boring, pen-pushing, dead end job’. The Fire Service thus doesn’t simply offer Mark an escape from ‘dead end’ jobs, it also echoes the hard labour masculinities displaced by deindustrialisation (McDowell, 2003).
Habitus encapsulates how the past comes to be embodied in the present, and we have suggested here that such histories must be understood to be place-bound both within material and subjective structures and relations, where ‘previous inscriptions of past cultures continue to be etched into the present, embodied by a new generation’ (Nayak, 2006: 828). In Stoke, alongside a depressed local labour market and invisible creative sector, local histories and narratives of loss shaped young people’s aspirations. While regional (re)imaginings of urban places and policy rhetoric about the knowledge economy repudiate the UK’s industrial heritage and demand a ‘severing of tired associations’ (Taylor & Addison, 2009), we have shown how ongoing identifications with the past powerfully shape young people’s imagined futures.

**The cosmopolitan habitus**

In contrast to Stoke on Trent, the creative sector featured strongly in the imagined futures of many of the participants from Nottingham and London, with more citing these as their ideal jobs. They constructed these jobs as: ‘fun’, ‘glamorous’, ‘exciting’, ‘different’, and as providing symbolic rewards, including status, the possibilities for travel, meeting people, and self-fulfillment:

They’re good jobs because you actually get something out of it at the end rather than just banking where you are just doing it for the money. You get something more, some kind of reward. (Scott, London)

In this section we unpick these different orientations and locate them
within the place-specific habitus of these areas. While the cosmopolitanism and metropolitan habitus have been strongly associated with London we want to show the possibilities for a step-change (Thrift 2005, in Hall et al., 2007) in other cities associated with patterns of cultural consumption (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004), and particular flows of people, knowledge and ‘creativity’. Thus, despite sharing similar processes of deindustrialisation and levels of ‘deprivation’, the narratives in Nottingham and London constructed the areas as dynamic, thus embodying a ‘cosmopolitan habitus’ in a way in which Stoke on Trent could not. These constructions of place had consequences on local aspirations whereby, the perceived cosmopolitanism of Nottingham and London more readily enabled young people within these areas to identify careers in the creative sector as possible and desirable places for them.

The Stoke on Trent locale was characterized by a long-term settled, predominantly white working class population (described by Acorn marketing classifications as lower income, older ‘established’ communities, often working in ‘routine occupations’). In contrast, both the Nottingham and London locales were characterized by a more mixed ethnic, social and age profile. School data described a multiethnic composition and this was borne out in our sample. The Nottingham school was situated in an area characterized as ‘Asian home owning’, and also dominated by students and young professionals. The London area boasted a ‘relatively young, family oriented population’, with ‘a mix of people’ and ‘relatively few pensioners’. This multicultural profile was accompanied by a certain dynamism, or mobility, with flows of migrations evident in our sample: In both Nottingham and London, while most of the young people had lived in the locale most of their life,
their parents were more likely to have migrated to the area.

The occupational profile of both areas was constructed in more dynamic terms also. The description of the London locale, as a ‘once blue-collar area [but] now home to office and clerical workers’, evokes what might be coined an ‘aspirational working class’ who has ‘moved on’ from its industrial past of routine manual work. The Nottingham locale is constructed in a similar way - as ‘aspirational’ - as somehow not stuck by deindustrialisation. While the media teacher at the school described it as an inner city school in a deprived area with kids from ‘challenging backgrounds’, he suggested that these pupils were from ‘aspirational’ families who, regardless of social class, want their kids to ‘go on and do other things’.

As in Stoke, the young people in Nottingham and London recognized that some parts of their area had a bad reputation, affected by crime, drugs and vandalism. However, they were keen to stress the overriding ‘goodness’ of the area. Tony from Nottingham encapsulates this in the sentiment, telling us ‘there’s good bits and bad bits’. In line with research on gentrification (see Byrne, 2006; Anon, forthcoming) the young people in London, and to some extent Nottingham, drew on discourses of multiculturalism and social mix to narrate their locale (and its inhabitants) as a ‘good’ place:

As a community we're quite close...we get along, there is a lot of mix of people from different cultures coming in and so it makes everything mixed. I think overall there are mostly good people here. (Sandeep, London)
We argue here that both the area's 'mix' and the flows of migrations serve to present the place as 'dynamic'.

Despite this fluidity and mobility, as with those in Stoke on Trent, many of these young people talked about preferring to 'stay local' in the future. However, this had very different implications in London and Nottingham due to available opportunities. The visible presence of the prestigious Russell Group University of Nottingham and the ex-polytechnic Nottingham Trent (with a good reputation for the arts and media) contributed to the perception of plentiful opportunity in the area. These were named as viable destinations within the young people's accounts and informed how careers in the creative sector became positioned as a credible course of action. ‘The University' loomed large in place-marketing material, and was deemed to play a key role in the visible ‘creative activity’ in the area. Indeed the creative industries were identified as one of five key growth sectors in Nottingham, with local universities ‘creating thousands of talented graduates’ to help the city compete in the 20th century knowledge economy (Invest in Nottingham, 2011\textsuperscript{v}). Sir Paul Smith, local fashion designer and ‘creative pioneer,’ is quoted, describing the importance of the universities to the creativity and dynamism of the locality:

Obviously I am biased about my home town being full of interesting and creative things, but I think it is helped by the Nottingham and Trent Universities; which means that we have got a lot of young people and young ideas constantly flowing through the city.

In regeneration materials, this ‘studentification’ alongside the flow of ‘young professionals colonising the area’ was identified as central to making the city a cosmopolitan place with ‘bars, eateries and specialist
shops cropping up’ in the locale (NRL website, vi 2011), branding the area as displaying the virtues of cosmopolitanism. The presence of the university and the flows of students and young professionals are promoted as bringing ‘opportunity’ in the form of jobs and places to go and things to do for local young people. In our study this construction of Nottingham produced a positive attachment to place among local people which shaped how they saw themselves and their futures. Jo a working class student in Nottingham provides an example of this. Jo’s mother was a sewing-machinist and father worked in a supermarket stacking shelves. While she saw the street she lived on as ‘notoriously rough’, she told us: ‘there’s a lot of opportunity here. There’s a lot of ways that you can get new jobs and meet new people. It’s very good, it’s very student orientated…There are a lot of student houses, lots of bars and places that people can go to but there’s also stuff for under 18s’. Jo was positive about her future, taking up a forward-looking, ‘aspirational’ orientation. She told us: ‘in primary school I always wanted to [move on] to secondary school and now I want to [move on] to college. When I’m at college I’m going to want to go uni to study media’.

Indeed, a certain place-consciousness (Kirk, 2007) enables Nottingham to be a contender for the creative economy in a way that Stoke on Trent simply cannot. Despite the creative industries in both areas employing less than 3% of the workforce, Nottingham, is cited as the fourth most creative city in Britain (NRL website 2011). While North Staffordshire is referred to as ‘falling behind’ (Work Foundation, 2008), Nottingham is described as a ‘spectacular success story’. This played into young people’s accounts: creative employment opportunities were visible, with students here citing local BBC, Trent
FM, and the Nottingham Evening Post as credible employment opportunities.

In the London locale, local economic development strategy documents identified the creative industries as a key ‘driver for economic growth’ and committed to developing the area into a ‘cultural hub’ with workspaces for use by creative businesses and investment in creative activities for local teenagers. Geographic proximity to London was identified as a key strength for the area’s successful transformation and its situation located in the heart of the so-called ‘largest regeneration area in Europe’. We argue that this geographic proximity to the capital and its employment opportunities shaped the aspirations of the young people in this locale, producing a sense of mobility and possibility in their narratives. The centre of London was a 30 minute commute, and it was the norm for participants and their families to make this journey for work and leisure. While the young people did not believe there to be many creative career opportunities in their immediate local area, they saw central London as easily commutable and thus physical accessibility to creative careers was not seen as a barrier. As Scott, an aspiring journalist, told us: ‘the city has got everything you would want and it’s not far from here’. Similarly Bianca explained: ‘we have loads of parks and open spaces so that’s good and I like the fact that you can easily get to places like London. You can just easily get there.’ London is seen as the place of opportunity and endless possibilities. Bianca’s reference to open spaces is a lovely metaphor for the outward looking, expansiveness of the possibilities of the area.

In addition, proximity to London, and the opportunities for the creative sector that it afforded, created the conditions for the schools’ investment in creative careers as a credible pursuit for the students,
and this legitimation, in turn, fed into student’s capacity to view the sector as a possibility. Horvat and Davis (2010) argue that schools can become sites for transformation rather than reproduction of habitus, producing the ‘possibilities for class mobility’ (2010: 143). Complicating this claim, we argue that the capacity for schools to transform habitus needs to consider the right temporal, material and spatial conditions that enable this. The London school had received substantial funding from the government for media and technology facilities including a fully-functioning television studio and the latest industry-standard music equipment. Participants used this regularly, for example to record ‘news reports’ and editing short films and taking on different roles such as producer or camera operator, and were impressed by the ‘high level’ standard of the facilities. This ‘real world’ experience of using industry standard equipment was seen by staff to provide essential experience that would benefit their futures. The young people reinforced this:

Scott: Using this equipment, it opens [up] all different opportunities ... you’re doing TV, newspaper, radio or whatever here so you've got loads of different options, it doesn’t limit you.

Nadira: It makes you see beyond what you can actually see what type of things go into making film. Before, I wouldn't have known about the floor managers and everything: it lets you see what jobs there are.

These positive accounts stood in contrast to those of the young people in Stoke and Nottingham who complained about problems with resourcing and functioning of equipment. Their accounts were imbued
with frustration at broken equipment, ‘wishy washy’ programmes and ‘crash courses’ leaving them feeling ‘down trodden’ and not ‘fulfilling [their] potential’.

In addition, because of its proximity to central London and the UK’s ‘creative capital’, the school’s media suite was used by ‘real life’ creative professionals. Staff revealed plans for the BBC to use the TV studio for training, and the suite was regularly hired out by local and national media companies. This impacted on the young people: despite being a non-selective state school, Bianca told us, ‘the school is like one of the best schools in the borough. It’s like the main part of the community ‘cos so many companies hire it.’ This industry connection contributed to the legitimating of their experience using these technologies as valuable for their future.

By running workshops led by ex-colleagues from the media industry and visits to local creative and cultural organizations, the Stoke and Nottingham schools attempted to provide similar experiences for their students, but with visibly more limited effects. These experiences were seen to broaden young people’s horizons, providing them with both tangible examples of the types of careers available and role models: in effect providing ‘disadvantaged’ young people with some of the ‘hot’ knowledge (Ball & Vincent, 1998) and social capital that middle class ‘creative’ families might ‘naturally’ provide their children. Following Quinn (2010) we argue that these experiences however, are more of a form of ‘imagined social capital’ and the extent to which this imagined social capital can be transformed into economic capital is hugely varied, and depends on existing resources the young person holds. For example, visits from industry professionals are only convertible into ‘real’ capital if the young person is able to sustain those relationships and operationalise these networks.
Beyond the one-off visit. A lack of credible opportunities locally or proximately renders this social capital a mirage, something of a cardboard cut-out. Thus, while these experiences go some way to transforming young people’s aspirations, helping them to imagine themselves in these careers, not all students can profit from them in the same way. As we show in the final section of this paper, even within the more cosmopolitan locales of Nottingham and London, it was students with other stocks of capital available to them who could more effectively convert this imagined social capital and embody the cosmopolitan identity of the creative worker. Thus, while proximity to ‘creative’ places and school experiences are important, we found that family capitals pertaining to careers in the creative sector – or the lack there of – endured in shaping aspirations.

The endurance of the classed habitus
Evan and Scott (London), and Thomas and Jo (Nottingham) provide interesting case studies to illuminate the enduring significance of class to young people’s aspirations. Evan and Thomas were from middle class families with parents or close family members who worked in the creative sector. Evan dreamed of ‘making it big’ with his band or working in music production; Thomas (encouraged by his godfather, a music reviewer and film critic) aimed to be a director and had dreams to move to London or New York. His mum ‘pulled some strings’ to get him a placement at a local media agency where she worked as an audience researcher. These students produced a stronger and more positive identification with creative careers as a meaningful world that was endowed with value and therefore worth investing one’s energy in (Reay, 2004: 435). Providing them with access to relevant and valued cultural and social capital pertaining to creative industries careers
made them appear more realizable and made it more possible to claim a cosmopolitan identity of the creative worker.

Furthermore, proximity to creative centres, plus access to relevant cultural and social capital came together to produce an entitled claiming of the social and spatial location of creative employment. As Binnie and Skeggs claim ‘class entitlement plays a major role in articulating and enabling who can be included and excluded from this space’ (2004: 40). Evan is a prime example here. Evan was of mixed ethnicity and self-identified as middle class. He had close relatives who worked in advertising, make-up for film and television and graphic design, and frequently quizzed them about their jobs to gain insight into how he might achieve a similar career. Cosmopolitanism is embodied through access to and knowledge of specific places and social spaces, and Evan’s family connections enabled him to positively identify with a range of careers in the creative sector, reinforcing his own identity as ‘creative’. In interview Evan cultivated an image of himself as highly entrepreneurial, able to move through different areas of the creative sector freely and flexibly. He had several creative ‘projects’ underway in his spare time and connected these to an array of career options: ‘I’ve done journalism, music producing, video editing. I can do so many things ....I’ve got options like actor, music producer, media producer’. Evan felt that anyone can make it in the sector, regardless of background: ‘There are equal opportunities to get into these jobs for people who bother to find it. Lots of people just expect it to find them. But you’ve got to go out there and get it.’

Of course we are only talking about aspiration here – we cannot say where Evan will actually end up. However what is significant is that he inhabited the cosmopolitan subjectivity of creative worker within his imagined future in a much more confident, seamless and entitled
way to working class students in Nottingham and London who, despite ‘strong’ aspirations for these careers, lacked the requisite social or cultural capital. For example, Scott’s (London) father was a builder and part-time London taxi driver and his mother was unemployed. He described how his parents supported him in his dreams to become a sports journalist: ‘they think I’ll be good at it and tried to help me look for work experience at local papers’. However, the parental support Scott received could not generate the same profits enjoyed by Thomas and Evan. His parents, occupying a very different objective position, did not have the relevant resources to help Scott secure relevant work experience. Scott explained how his letters and emails requesting work experience went unanswered. Scott’s aspirations for creative careers were also marked by a sense of curtailment: he talked about ‘starting small’ in local papers and ‘working his way up’. Jo, in Nottingham, who we met earlier, reveals a similar story. For work experience she ‘wanted to do something with media’ but explained, ‘I didn’t know how to go about it and then it got too late’. Instead she did her work placement at an energy company. Her interview was peppered with hesitancy about how she would achieve her dream career in television. Unlike Evan’s meritocratic approach, Jo was aware of the social inequalities that might prevent a girl like her from ‘making it’, and felt that achieving her dream job would be more likely if she were middle class and ‘born into it like Peaches Geldof’\(^\text{ix}\). Consequently Jo curbed her aspirations, telling us ‘I like to shoot high but I don’t like to shoot \textit{too} high ‘cos you get shot down’.

For Jo and Scott, despite their proximity to the flows of the creative sector and access to legitimizing experiences in the school, their aspirations were curbed, underlined by a hesitancy about how realizable these were for ‘people like them’. Their orientation towards
creative careers – ‘shooting lower’ and ‘starting small’ - unlike the entitled disposition embodied by Evan: theirs was not about free movement within the social space of the creative industries, but about not taking up too much space.

Conclusion

For people in Stoke it’s hard to escape. [...] I want to get people to realise there is life outside of Stoke, which is quite difficult if you are in Stoke and you don't see any exit signs anywhere. (Media Teacher, Stoke)

We have attempted to challenge ‘raising aspiration’ policy discourse by illuminating how social class and place come together in powerful and complex ways to shape young people’s aspirations and capacity for mobility for and through work in the knowledge economy. Our analysis suggests that we cannot look at the role of school or family in shaping aspiration without looking at the spatial context in which these practices take place. Examining the dispositional positioning of young people in three urban locales, we have shown that localized sets of material, social and imagined relations are central in producing young people’s sense of place in the world and their possibilities of mobility.

While we are not suggesting that these locales are representative of any kind of typology of place-specific habitus, we hope to have used discussion of these three locales as more of a heuristic device to explore the exclusions and curtailments that operate in particular places and indicate the possibilities of transformation in aspiration. We have argued that flows and mobility were central to the
production of a place-specific habitus across the three locales. Stoke on Trent was construed more in terms of stasis and immobility, an absence of flows and a lack of ‘exit signs’, suggesting a stickiness of place which restricted local young people’s mobility. In contrast, the Nottingham and London locales were characterized as more dynamic, which helped to enable careers in the creative sector to feature in these young people’s plausibility structure. The ‘multi-cultural’ mix of both areas, the spectre of the university and investment in the local creative sector in Nottingham, and the proximity to the UK’s creative capital and the legitimating power of this proximity on school practices in London, produced feeling of opportunity and possibility which shaped local aspirations. However, while we have suggested that young people’s orientations towards careers in the creative sector might be transformed by wider changes within their locality, we have also illustrated the enduring significance of class, showing how family capital pertaining to creative careers significantly shape young people’s capacity to inhabit the position of the creative, cosmopolitan worker.

Claims to transformations in habitus must be made with caution. Concentrating on transforming individual aspiration not only risks reproducing the normative assumptions of the ‘aspirational project’, it can also take attention away from the material conditions of possibility within which ‘aspiration’ can be realised (St Clair & Benjamin, 2010). Raising young people aspiration’s without providing labour market opportunities to accommodate these is dangerous. This is particularly pertinent in regards to raising aspirations for careers in the creative and knowledge economy: Despite their endorsement, these in fact make up only a small proportion of the labour market in comparison to the expansion of low skilled routine jobs (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). Furthermore the recent economic downturn and new Coalition
government's policies contributing to rising youth unemployment in the UK, mean that the possibilities to realise aspirations for careers in the creative sector are even smaller. There also appears to be a shift in how the creative economy features in local and regional policy. At the time of writing this paper the North Staffordshire Regeneration Partnership has collapsed, and regeneration strategy in the London locale has subsequently been revised, with, now, no mention of the creative sector in its objectives. With the creative sector unable to fulfil its promises of transformation - of un-sticking people and place - policy history is subtly re-written, but the embodied histories of people and place are not so easily erased.

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To protect the identity of the schools participating in the research, the specific localities are not named.

Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Stoke on Trent is officially a city but was formed by federation of six separate towns, which have retained some individual identities.


Reference not provided to protect anonymity of school.

Reference not provided to protect anonymity of school.

Peaches Geldof, daughter of musician Bob Geldof, is a 'socialite' and minor celebrity who has presented her own television shows.